

## Article

# A Case for a Critical Information Ethics: Lessons Learned from Research Justice

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## ABSTRACT

Information ethics as taught in academic information literacy treats students as consumers, largely ignores the broader sociopolitical context of academic knowledge creation and, through a lack of critical analysis, reproduces Eurocentrism and colonialism in the information literacy classroom and literature. We propose applying a *critical information ethics* inspired by *research justice* that emphasizes solidarity with marginalized people and communities, respect for community knowledge, and moral integrity related to situated knowledge versus capitalist notions of information as a commodity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Through information literacy instruction, librarians in higher education aim to engage students in critical thought around information. For a little over a decade, information literacy instruction has included a discussion of “the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally.”<sup>1</sup> In this article, we argue that this discussion, as framed by information literacy standards, literature and practices, is a kind of information ethics-lite. We compare this limited information ethics worldview defined and perpetuated by mainstream information literacy instruction with the information ethics worldview put forth in a community-based framework and research methodology called *research justice*.

In the mainstream information literacy worldview, what we would characterize as information ethics topics are primarily defined and taught through narrow capitalist conceptions of information as a commodity, which leads to an approach to research that reifies a white supremacist, Eurocentric status quo. In the research justice worldview, as defined by The Data Center<sup>2</sup>, information ethics is dispatched through such tenets as research is for action, communities create valuable knowledge, and an ethical approach to research is an antiracist and decolonial approach to research. Consequently, we propose a *critical information ethics* be applied to information literacy pedagogy, informed and inspired by research justice and emphasizing solidarity with marginalized people and communities, respect for community knowledge, and moral integrity related to situated knowledge.

This article evolved as an answer to the question, “How can librarians in higher education use principles of community engagement in information literacy instruction?” We were faced with this question during our participation in a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) about Community Engagement and Social Responsibility, where the faculty participants were challenged to connect community engagement to our own curricula. Community engagement was defined in relation to service learning. Service learning is a pedagogical approach that takes students out of the classroom to apply what they have learned in a volunteer, community service capacity. Community engagement, on the other hand, emphasizes building strong relationships between universities and communities that are mutually beneficial and reciprocal.<sup>3</sup> By definition, community engagement is broader than service learning, which means that students are able to

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<sup>1</sup> “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,” January 2000, <https://alair.ala.org/handle/11213/7668>.

<sup>2</sup> “What Is Research Justice?” *DataCenter* (blog), accessed May 4, 2015, <http://www.datacenter.org/what-we-do/research-justice/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Carnegie Classifications | Community Engagement FAQs,” accessed March 26, 2014, [http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/descriptions/ce\\_faq.php](http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/descriptions/ce_faq.php).

practice what they learn by participating in a pre-existing, functioning, and hopefully equitable relationship with community entities rather than putting in volunteer hours with an organization that may not have any other connection to the university than the faculty member teaching the course.

Our FLC colleagues who used some form of service learning in their courses were able to compare the two philosophies and identify the ways in which their students could both learn and provide communities with skilled labor to accomplish work the communities have identified as important. As instructors of a 2-unit freshmen level information literacy course who did not use service learning pedagogy to start with, we were stumped. How is community engagement applicable to information literacy instruction? Information literacy is, at a very basic level, a meta-analysis of one's ability to cope with a vast and fast-moving information landscape. Within the constraints of our course, there was no opportunity for students to volunteer with outside organizations or shadow professionals at work.

In our search for connections between community engagement and information literacy, we went back to the ACRL Standards for Information Literacy in Higher Education. Our hypothesis was that we could connect community engagement's focus on social justice with the social justice potential in information literacy. However, as has been noted by scholars in critical librarianship, nowhere do the standards mention social justice.<sup>4</sup> The newly proposed and later approved ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education provided no more useful insight or direction on the role of social justice and community engagement in information literacy instruction. So we began to draw our own conceptual connections among community engagement, social justice, and information literacy.

This article is organized into four parts: *Information Ethics, Social Justice, and Critical Thought*, which describes our reading of information ethics and its intersection with social justice and critical librarianship; *Race-Based Epistemologies and Research Justice*, which provides a definition of and theoretical background for the concept of research justice; *Professional Norms and Standards*, which discusses the role of standards, guidelines and professional norms in developing an information ethics worldview within academic information literacy, as well as critical analysis of these norms and standards; and *Conclusion*, in which we advance our argument for the application of a critical information ethics within academic information literacy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Battista et al., "Seeking Social Justice in the ACRL Framework," *Communications in Information Literacy* 9, no. 2 (2015): 111–25.

<sup>5</sup> "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education"; Association of College & Research Libraries, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," January 11, 2016, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

## INFORMATION ETHICS, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND CRITICAL THOUGHT

The discipline of information ethics was launched in the late 1980s by library and information scientists such as Robert Hauptman and the extremely prolific Rafael Capurro.<sup>6</sup> Since then, scholars in LIS and other disciplines have also produced literature in the associated realms of internet, media, and business ethics.<sup>7</sup> In the library context, information ethics has frequently addressed how librarians should act in a professional setting regarding patron privacy, copyright law, censorship, intellectual property, reference interactions, and balanced collection development. Numerous books and articles have been published on the relationship between information ethics and the library profession, including its historical evolution.<sup>8</sup> Broadly speaking, information ethics appears in library and information science as:

- a professional code of behavior for librarians (e.g., reference and instruction interactions with patrons or collection development),
- a philosophical understanding and discussion of ethics in librarianship (e.g., definitions and theories of ethics),
- a perspective on the rights of information seekers as consumers and owners (e.g., privacy and intellectual property), and
- a way of navigating information technology challenges (e.g., the advent of computers and the Internet).

In the 1970s, as social and political change movements swept the United States, Vavrek and Hauptman questioned the 'neutral' reference service standard that was thought to be proper ethical provision of service to patrons.<sup>9</sup> Neutrality was taught as an approach to keep librarian personal prejudices out of the interaction and, in theory, provide the patron with the best service to match their information need. A decade later, Hauptman was the first to publish the use of the term "information ethics," which

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Hauptman, *Ethical Challenges in Librarianship* (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1988); Rafael Capurro, "Informationsethos Und Informationsethik [Information Ethos and Information Ethics]," *Nachrichten Für Dokumentation* 39 (1988): 1–4.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Froelich, "A Brief History of Information Ethics," BiD: textos universitaris de biblioteconomia i documentació, December 2004, <http://bid.ub.edu/13froel2.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Ali Shiri, "Exploring Information Ethics: A Metadata Analytics Approach," *Journal of Information Ethics* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 17–37; Froelich, "A Brief History of Information Ethics"; Martha M. Smith, "The Beginnings of Information Ethics," *Journal of Information Ethics* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 15–24, <https://doi.org/10.31721/JIE.20.2.15>.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Vavrek, "Ethics for Reference Librarians," *RQ* 12, no. 1 (1972): 56–58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25824649>; Robert Hauptman, "Professionalism or Culpability?" *An Experiment in Ethics* 50 (April 1976): 626–27.

appeared in a monograph treatise on professional ethics for the librarian.<sup>10</sup> He declared, "It is a lamentable fact that librarians have never been overly concerned with the ethical implications of their work."<sup>11</sup> A year later, a meeting was held to further the cause of the newly termed "information ethics," with presentations focusing on its professional, philosophical, and legal aspects. An outgrowth of the meeting was the *Journal of Information Ethics*.<sup>12</sup> For its first few decades, the articles within this publication focus primarily on the common information ethics topics of the profession, technology, and 'consumer' rights. While this book, the meeting proceedings, and the journal publication certainly charge librarians to look more seriously at their ethical view of the world and the librarian profession, they are solidly encased in the capitalist and colonial notions that social responsibility is an antagonist to intellectual freedom, and that neutrality is the best path towards intellectual freedom for the individual. This narrative suggests that a librarian simply advocating for access to particular information resources impedes the open, equitable access to information resources in general, and it provides no space for the acknowledgement of marginalized members of library communities and the invalidating effects of so-called 'neutrality' on them, their lived experiences and cultural knowledge.

Further into the 1990s, as interpersonal communication became more technologically complex with the Internet beginning to permeate the home life of the elite, the use of the word "information" grew accordingly. Discussions of definitions and theories regarding information became more prevalent.<sup>13</sup> Conversations around information ethics began to link neutrality and cultural oppression more explicitly. Alfino and Pierce argued, "At best, reference librarians are, in the name of neutrality, perpetuating the biases of the research communities and prevailing cultural ideologies dominant in the library's collection."<sup>14</sup> Still, the pervasive rhetoric of a materialistic culture, ignorant of marginalized ways of relating to and understanding information and knowledge, can be found in professional/graduate textbooks from the time period.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hauptman, *Ethical Challenges in Librarianship*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> J. Periam Danton, "Journal of Information Ethics, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Fall 1992), and Vol. 2, Nos. 1-2 (Spring 1993 and Fall 1993)," *Periodical Review* 64, no. 4 (October 1994): 490–92, <https://doi.org/10.1086/602746>; Anne P. Mintz, ed., *Information Ethics: Concerns for Librarianship and the Information Industry : Proceedings of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Symposium of the Graduate Alumni and Faculty of the Rutgers School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies, 14 April 1989* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Mark Alfino and Linda Pierce, *Information Ethics for Librarians* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Richard James Severson, *The Principles of Information Ethics* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997).

In the first decade of the 2000s, the mainstream library literature shows the early stages of recognizing the cultural wealth of non-Western perspectives in relation to information ethics, but not without some backlash.<sup>16</sup> Capurro introduced the concept of *intercultural information ethics* that highlights how globalization of information communicated through technological advancement is viewed through different cultural lenses, and the Eurocentric bias of information ethics as it had been conceived, discussed and analyzed thus far.<sup>17</sup> Kvasny shared about integrating social justice concepts into an information ethics course that acknowledged the systemic injustices of Western privilege that persistently reifies the mainstream conceptions of 'lesser' groups and associated disparities.<sup>18</sup> Mathiesen developed a philosophy of informational justice as a way to explore how creating, accessing, and using information are human rights.<sup>19</sup>

While these and other information ethics scholars have grappled with critical questions regarding gatekeeping, preserving the voices of the marginalized, neutrality versus positionality, and the socio-political context of information cataloging and classification, particularly in the context of social justice and intellectual freedom,<sup>20</sup> information ethics as defined and practiced in academic librarianship does not always reflect this nuanced, critical conscious thought. Researchers across many disciplines continue to raise provocative and essential questions of how critical race theory, indigenous cultural wealth, corrupted globalization, unbalanced power relations, decolonization and liberalization of knowledge are all elements of information ethics but

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<sup>16</sup> Don Fallis, "Information Ethics for Twenty-first Century Library Professionals," *Library Hi Tech* 25, no. 1 (2007): 23–36, <https://doi.org/10.1108/07378830710735830>.

<sup>17</sup> Rafael Capurro, "Towards an Ontological Foundation of Information Ethics," *Ethics and Information Technology* 8, no. 4 (2006): 175–86, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-006-9108-0>; Rafael Capurro, "Intercultural Information Ethics: Foundations and Applications," *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society* 6, no. 2 (2008): 116–26, <https://doi.org/10.1108/14779960810888347>.

<sup>18</sup> Lynette Kvasny, "Ethics and Social Justice in Undergraduate Informatics Education," in *Proceedings of the Third Annual iConference, 2008* (University of California, Los Angeles, 2008), <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/15106>.

<sup>19</sup> Kay Mathiesen, "Informational Justice: A Conceptual Framework for Social Justice in Library and Information Services," *Library Trends* 64, no. 2 (2015): 198–225, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0044>.

<sup>20</sup> Kay Mathiesen and Don Fallis, "Information Ethics and the Library Profession," in *Handbook of Information and Computer Ethics*, eds. Kenneth E. Himma and Herman T. Tavani (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2008), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1264203>; K. R Roberto and Sanford Berman, *Radical Cataloging: Essays at the Front* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008); Mathiesen, "Informational Justice."

have been mostly neglected by higher education instructional librarians as exemplified by their absence from the information literacy instructional Standards and Framework.<sup>21</sup> Thus, mainstream information literacy, in particular, treats students almost exclusively as consumers, largely ignores the broader sociopolitical context of academic knowledge creation and, through a lack of critical analysis, reproduces the Eurocentrism and colonialism that is the legacy of Western higher education in the information literacy classroom and literature. This oversimplified and depoliticized version of information ethics perpetuates the myth of information neutrality and reduces individuals' interactions with information to narrow capitalist notions of value. In mainstream information literacy instruction, therefore, the working definition of ethics boils down to "following the rules."

Within the construct of information literacy instruction for college students, information ethics is usually considered an essential principle expressed through Standard Five of the *Standards*. However, as we will discuss later, this standard's descriptive components and the research related to its application in instructional settings clearly demonstrate a singular focus on consumer and capitalist approaches to information use by students.<sup>22</sup> Recently, as social justice has become a more prominent

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<sup>21</sup> John Buschman, "Citizenship and Agency Under Neoliberal Global Consumerism," *Journal of Information Ethics* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 38–53; David J. Hudson, "On Dark Continents and Digital Divides: Information Inequality and the Reproduction of Racial Otherness in Library and Information Studies," *Journal of Information Ethics* 25, no. 1 (2016): 62–80; Tracie D. Hall, "The Black Body at the Reference Desk: Critical Race Theory and Black Librarianship," in *21st-Century Black Librarian in America: Issues and Challenges* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 197–202; Isabel R. Espinal, "A New Vocabulary for Inclusive Librarianship: Applying Whiteness Theory to Our Profession," in *The Power of Language/El Poder de La Palabra*, by Lillian Castillo-Speed (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2001), [https://works.bepress.com/isabel\\_espinal/5/](https://works.bepress.com/isabel_espinal/5/); Lorie Roy, "Advancing an Indigenous Ecology within LIS Education," *Library Trends* 64, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 384–414; Lynette Shultz and Ali A. Abdi, "Decolonizing Information Ethics for the Liberation of Knowledge," in *Information Ethics, Globalization and Citizenship: Essays on Ideas to Praxis* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2017), 34–45; Todd Honma, "Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies," *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (June 21, 2005), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4nj0w1mp>.

<sup>22</sup> Michelle Leigh Jacobs, "Ethics and Ethical Challenges in Library Instruction," *Journal of Library Administration* 47, nos. 3 and 4 (May 2008): 211–32; Lori E. Buchanan, DeAnne L. Luck, and Ted C. Jones, "Integrating Information Literacy into the Virtual University: A Course Model," *Library Trends* 51, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 144; Jeffrey A. Liles and Michael E. Rozalski, "It's a Matter of Style: A Style Manual Workshop for Preventing Plagiarism," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 11, no. 2 (2004): 91–101, [https://doi.org/10.1300/J106v11n02\\_08](https://doi.org/10.1300/J106v11n02_08); Lucinda A. Rush, "Learning Through Play, the Old School Way: Teaching Information Ethics to Millennials," *Journal of Library Innovation* 5, no. 2 (2014): 1–14; Connie Strittmatter and Virginia K. Bratton,

component in higher education institutions, some academic librarians have sought ways to incorporate this movement into their information literacy instruction by using it to establish an awareness of systematically marginalized groups of people, elevate situated experiential knowledge, and create pathways for critical analysis of students' own agency in navigating the beautifully diverse information world.<sup>23</sup>

In the neoliberal context of higher education, information literacy is commonly interpreted as a practical set of tools meant to support students in approaching research in a strategic way. Librarians and other educators give instruction on the academic value system as it relates to using information "ethically and legally" by using appropriate citation styles, following copyright law, and respecting intellectual property. However, thanks to the burgeoning critical information literacy literature, we have also begun exploring ways we can address issues of inequity and power in the classroom by applying pedagogical approaches that center the lived experiences of students (asset-based and critical pedagogies).<sup>24</sup> It is vital that we create classroom spaces that are student-centered, that give voice to student concerns, and that de-center our authority as teachers (even as that authority is complicated by our own intersectional positionalities). These efforts help to mitigate the ways in which higher education functions as a tool of

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"Plagiarism Awareness among Students: Assessing Integration of Ethics Theory into Library Instruction," *College & Research Libraries* 75, no. 5 (2014): 736–52, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.75.5.736>; Benjamin R. Harris, "Communities as Necessity in Information Literacy Development: Challenging the Standards.," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 34, no. 3 (2008): 248–55; Gail Wood, "Academic Original Sin: Plagiarism, the Internet, and Librarians," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 30, no. 3 (2004): 237–42, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2004.02.011>.

<sup>23</sup> Katy Mathuews, "Moving Beyond Diversity to Social Justice," *Progressive Librarian*, no. 44 (2016): 6–27; Nicole A. Cooke, Miriam E. Sweeney, and Safiya Umoja Noble, "Social Justice as Topic and Tool: An Attempt to Transform an LIS Curriculum and Culture," *The Library Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2015): 107–24, <https://doi.org/10.1086/684147>; Deborah Lang Froggatt, "The Informationally Underserved: Not Always Diverse, but Always a Social Justice Advocacy Model," *School Libraries Worldwide* 21, no. 1 (2015): 54–72, <https://doi.org/10.14265.21.1.004>; James H. Wittebols, "Empowering Students to Make Sense of an Information-Saturated World," *Communications in Information Literacy* 10, no. 1 (2016): 1–13; Laura Saunders, "Connecting Information Literacy and Social Justice: Why and How," *Communications in Information Literacy* 11, no. 1 (2017): 55–75, <https://doi.org/10.7548/cil.v11i1.459>; Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins, "Reorienting an Information Literacy Program Toward Social Justice: Mapping the Core Values of Librarianship to the ACRL Framework," *Communications in Information Literacy* 11, no. 1 (2017): 42–54, <https://doi.org/10.7548/cil.v11i1.463>; Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1970); bell hooks, *Teaching To Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*.



social control by resisting the hierarchical concept of “banking education.” Equally vital, but less fully explored, is the need for teaching librarians to engage students around the sociopolitical context of knowledge production. Without critical, anti-racist reflection and analysis of how, why and by whom information (and, by extension, knowledge) is created, information literacy as a Eurocentric “educational reform movement” reproduces and reinforces intellectual colonialism.<sup>25</sup>

## RACE-BASED EPISTEMOLOGIES AND RESEARCH JUSTICE

Anti-racist reflection and analysis must begin with an understanding of how race and racism have historically functioned in the production of knowledge, particularly in academia, and how they continue to do so today. The idea of the university as we know it was promulgated in Europe during the Enlightenment. At the same time, while Enlightenment-era Europeans did not invent race, they did enforce a hierarchical system of racial categorization that they both used to consolidate imperial power and spread as they invaded, conquered, and colonized other cultures. Due to the sociopolitical contexts in which academic disciplines were created and have flourished, racism and Eurocentrism are also built into the very research methods scholars rely on to provide evidence for our worldviews. The development of the discipline of sociology, for instance, was heavily influenced by eugenics and fascism in the 1930s.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Association of College & Research Libraries, “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education”; “Critics of colonial discourse...remind us that Western colonialism has never been a purely military or economic undertaking: Where empire has drawn its power from swords and railroads, from pipelines, pesticides, and drone strikes, it has also drawn its power from cultural practice—that is, from the production and circulation, reproduction and recirculation, of texts, narratives, languages, and imagery, both literally and figuratively. A key aspect of colonial knowledge production in this respect has been the articulation of narratives of racial difference, which have circumscribed the limits of how the landscape and communities under the gaze of conquest have come to be known and named, whether through the writing of a pen on paper or sword on skin.” Hudson, “On Dark Continents and Digital Divides.”

<sup>26</sup> Winant’s (2000) history of the sociology of race provides us with an important illustration of the ways in which European ethnocentrism is at the heart of most of our modern conceptions of knowledge. First, he reminds us that “racial categorization of human beings was a European invention.” He further argues that “this is not to say that the European attainment of imperial and world-encompassing power gave rise to race. Indeed, it is just as easy to argue the opposite: that the modern concept of race gave rise to, or at least facilitated the creation of, an integrated sociopolitical world, a modern authoritarian state, the structures of an international economy, and the emergence over time of a global culture.” See Howard Winant, “Race and Race Theory,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 169–85. Additionally, Stoler (1995) tells us that “power organizes knowledge in a way that justifies and re-produces

From phrenology to medical experimentation to anthropological racism, research that values only Western ways of knowing has been a site of trauma for people and cultures considered 'Other' by Eurocentric academic traditions. As a result, traditional Western academic research has often walked hand in hand with colonialism and imperialism as a tool to suppress, and in some cases eradicate, indigenous ways of knowing. In her groundbreaking book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith outlines in exhaustive detail the ways in which Western-influenced research methodologies have harmed indigenous people. She points out that assumptions about who owns culture-specific knowledge, for instance, or how that knowledge can be shared or used, and even the belief that one universal definition of truth exists and can be described in a politically neutral way through the scientific method are examples of the Western intellectual status quo that has been the root of many intercultural missteps and injuries.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to observing and naming the academic supremacy of Eurocentric epistemologies that invalidate the ways of knowing practiced by people of color, critical race theorists and practitioners have elucidated the need for "race-based epistemologies" that challenge the academic norms, values and practices that naturalize Eurocentric ways of thinking. These race-based epistemologies--such as Black feminist thought--center the experiences of people of color, not just as stories to be used in 'real' research, but as expert knowledge in and of itself. Almeida describes a central tenet of race-based epistemologies in simple terms: "people who actually live a certain reality and have experience in that reality should be central to producing knowledge of that reality."<sup>28</sup>

Research justice is an example of one such community-based research methodology and intervention that seeks to "transform structural inequities in research" by centralizing "community voices and leadership in an effort to facilitate genuine, lasting social change," and fostering "critical engagement with communities of color, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups to use research as an empowering intervention and active disruption of colonial policies and institutional practices that contribute to the (re)production of social inequalities in research and public policy." In the research justice worldview, "marginalized communities are recognized as experts, and reclaim, own and

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historical, social, and racial distinctions and exclusions in the world. It is those who experience the effects of these classifications, who have distinct ways of knowing, that are continuously marginalized in the dominant, mainstream, western scholarly canon of epistemology." As cited in Shana Almeida, "Race-Based Epistemologies: The Role of Race and Dominance in Knowledge Production," *Wagadu* 13 (2015).

<sup>27</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York, NY: Zed Books Ltd., 1999).

<sup>28</sup> Almeida, "Race-Based Epistemologies" 94.

wield **all** forms of knowledge and information.”<sup>29</sup> The expertise of public thinkers and activists is valued on par with that of scholars and institutional academics.<sup>30</sup> Although perhaps not an explicitly race-based epistemology, research justice likewise champions “embodied knowing” that “affirms the value of subjective, lived experience, and rejects Eurocentric, male-centered systems of knowledge production.”<sup>31</sup>

Academic libraries are one of those Eurocentric, patriarchal systems of knowledge production and dissemination that came out of an Enlightenment-era European conceptualization of how (and which) information should be stored and organized, and to whom it should be made available.<sup>32</sup> The overwhelming whiteness of librarianship is also a reflection and a reproduction of racial and class hegemonies.<sup>33</sup> As a result, we wish here to acknowledge that, as white librarians who work primarily with students of color, our engagement in this article with race-based epistemologies such as research justice is inevitably influenced by our privileged position within a Eurocentric academic tradition. The discussion of research justice in this article is intended to highlight the emotional, physical, and intellectual labor of community theorists and practitioners who developed it for their communities and not for academic appropriation. It is not, therefore, our argument that all librarians should adopt and use research justice, but rather that we must support and participate in the work these epistemologies are doing to correct the ethical failures in Eurocentric knowledge production. One of the ways we

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<sup>29</sup> “DataCenter: Research for Justice,” accessed September 29, 2017, <http://www.datacenter.org/>.

<sup>30</sup> Miho Kim Lee, “Foreword,” in *Research Justice: Methodologies for Social Change* (Bristol, UK and Chicago, IL: Policy Press, 2015), xvii–xx.

<sup>31</sup> Almeida, “Race-Based Epistemologies” 94.

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed history of librarianship see Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979); for discussion of how professionalism reinforces gender roles see Roma M. Harris, “Gender, Power, and the Dangerous Pursuit of Professionalism,” *American Libraries* 24, no. 9 (1993): 874–76; for discussion of librarian perception in the context of gendered and racialized stereotypes see Gr Keer and Andrew Carlos, “The Stereotype Stereotype: Our Obsession with Librarian Representation,” in *The Librarian Stereotype: Deconstruction Perceptions & Presentations of Information Work*, ed. Nicole Pagowsky and Miriam Rigby (Chicago, IL: ACRL Press, 2014), 63–83; for discussion of how classification systems reproduce hegemonic inequities see K.R. Roberto, “Inflexible Bodies: Metadata for Transgender Identities,” *Journal of Information Ethics* 20, no. 2 (2011): 56–64, <https://doi.org/10.3172/JIE.20.2.56> and Emily Drabinski, “Teaching the Radical Catalog,” in *Radical Cataloging: Essays at the Front*, ed. K. R. Roberto (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2008), 198–205.

<sup>33</sup> For an in-depth treatment of how whiteness functions in librarianship, see Gina Schlesselman-Tarango, ed., *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*, Series on Critical Race Studies and Multiculturalism in LIS (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017). See also Espinal, “A New Vocabulary for Inclusive Librarianship.”

can do that, as we will discuss further in the next section, is to address the inadequacies of information literacy's overall conception of information ethics.

Among these failures and inadequacies is the profession's emphasis on library and librarian neutrality. Within information literacy instruction, for example, neutrality is often recommended in evaluating sources. Students are taught that bias is negative and should be avoided, when a more social justice-oriented approach would acknowledge that all sources have a bias (or perspective) and that it's important to understand what that bias is in order to get a more complete picture of the topic at hand. Despite decades of diligent work on the part of people of color activists and thinkers to draw attention to them, Eurocentric research practices such as these persist in part because "the ontologies and epistemologies of the dominant group that have continued to dominate for hundreds of years become so deeply embedded in contemporary society that they are seen to be 'natural,' rather than socially constructed throughout history."<sup>34</sup>

The ontologies and epistemologies of the dominant group also serve the political interests of, and are defended by the systems established by, racial capitalism.<sup>35</sup> As such, Eurocentric assumptions are very difficult to question or change if they are presupposed to be neutral, natural, or "just the way it is." Being able to see behind the curtain, as it were, involves becoming aware that "subordinated groups have their own partial, situated knowledge and perspectives (meaning that there is no one truth 'out there' to be uncovered) linked to the contexts in which they are created," and so do hegemonic views.<sup>36</sup> Librarian neutrality serves the interests of white supremacy because it reinforces the status quo. By naming the ways in which white supremacy and Eurocentrism of information literacy invalidates POC and indigenous ways of knowing, and by challenging the epistemological practices that naturalize Western ways of thinking within librarianship, critical information ethics can play a pivotal role in challenging this supremacy of one way of knowing.

## PROFESSIONAL NORMS AND STANDARDS

Epistemological practices that naturalize Western ways of thinking are also present in and reinforced by the codes and standards our national organizations have developed to

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<sup>34</sup> Stanfield as cited in Almeida, "Race-Based Epistemologies," 83.

<sup>35</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>36</sup> "If these perspectives are shared (Hill Collins calls this "pivoting the center,") we can see how hegemonic structures and representations are insufficient in our own lives and the lives of others. We can better understand how hegemonic views are also partial and situated, and that the supremacy of one way of knowing should be challenged." Almeida, "Race-Based Epistemologies," 93.

guide our ethical understanding and behavior. The American Library Association's (ALA) first code of ethics was written in 1938 and has been revised several times to reflect increasing awareness of librarians' socioeconomic and cultural roles in communities. Additionally, ALA has a Library Bill of Rights to further clarify protections of the library patron. The Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) offers a standard for academic libraries that includes core principles and their related performance indicators. Internationally, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has published a *Code for Ethics for Librarians and other Information Workers* that seeks to translate the human rights expressed in the United Nations' *Declaration of Human Rights* into the information arena.<sup>37</sup> Clearly, standards and codes are one of the ways in which library and information science expresses and promotes its ethical values. Most of these, however, lack explicit critical analysis of the systemic injustices and Eurocentric socio-political and cultural dominance that libraries have historically promulgated through their own systems, organizations, and workers.

Similarly, although both the *Standards* and the *Framework*, which guide information literacy theory and practice in higher education, hint at an acknowledgment of the social and political construction of knowledge, they remain, to varying degrees, entrenched in a capitalist model. In this model, each student is positioned as a consumer who must be taught how to ethically and legally purchase and use information, which is framed as a valuable commodity. Standard Five places this relationship into a formulation of ethics, asserting that, in order to be considered information literate, the student must both understand the ethical and legal implications of using information and follow the rules governing its use. The role of students in this model is to demand scholarly resources to fulfill their information needs, and libraries (via database vendors and publishing companies) supply consumable content to meet that demand. The more conceptual *Framework* gestures toward engaging with a more complex version of reality in the Information Has Value frame. This frame acknowledges that information exists within multiple competing value systems and suggests that students may struggle with navigating them. It covers the traditional information ethics topics such as copyright, plagiarism, and intellectual property, but it also mentions issues of power, marginalization, and privilege that complicate the pure capitalist value of information.<sup>38</sup> However, as Battista et al. point out, despite the small advances made in the *Framework* toward incorporating social justice concepts, neither of these documents make an explicit

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<sup>37</sup> "Professional Ethics," Text, Tools, Publications & Resources, May 19, 2017, <http://www.ala.org/tools/ethics>; "Library Bill of Rights," Text, Advocacy, Legislation & Issues, June 30, 2006, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>; "Standards for Libraries in Higher Education," Text, Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), August 29, 2006, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/standardslibraries>.

<sup>38</sup> Association of College & Research Libraries, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education."

statement connecting information literacy to social justice, much less to antiracist or decolonial goals.<sup>39</sup>

In the neoliberal context of higher education, professional norms of information literacy instruction, which influence and are influenced by the standards documents as well as larger academic hierarchies, reinforce this capitalist conception of information ethics by limiting the discourse around ethics to cautioning students against stealing valuable content through plagiarism, encouraging them to follow copyright law, and suggesting that students protect their personal information from those who may wish to acquire it for free and then sell it for a profit. The relationship between student and information is stunted by this conceptualization of information ethics. While a larger conversation about ethical engagement with information should include discussions about asking permission and giving credit for the intellectual labor of others, positioning students as potential criminals does nothing to encourage the development of integrity around information use.

This is not to say that there is no space in our profession for critique of or departure from neoliberal notions of information ethics. Despite the lack of an explicit linkage to social justice in the standards and professional norms of academic librarianship, many librarians are fully aware that information literacy encompasses more than finding, evaluating and using information, and as such, they conceptualize of and put into practice an information literacy that is social justice-oriented.<sup>40</sup> A social justice approach to information literacy instruction is also supported by literature coming out of the critical information literacy movement.<sup>41</sup> Critical librarianship puts forth evidence that librarianship itself is not immune from the sociopolitical context in which we practice it and illuminates the ways in which some of our most deeply held professional self-narratives, such as “librarians are neutral information brokers,” are simply not and never have been true. If we look at it through a critical lens, we see that information literacy is in fact the state of being cognizant of the sociopolitical context of information and information sources, understanding the complexities of information creation and use,

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<sup>39</sup> Battista et al., “Seeking Social Justice in the ACRL Framework.”

<sup>40</sup> As noted in the *Introduction to Information Ethics* section.

<sup>41</sup> Emily Drabinski and Meghan Sitar, “What Standards Do and What They Don’t,” in *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook*, vol. 2 (Chicago, IL: ACRL Press, 2016), 53–64; J. Elmborg, “Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 2 (2006): 192–99; Maura Seale, “Information Literacy Standards and the Politics of Knowledge Production: Using User-Generated Content to Incorporate Critical Pedagogy,” in *Critical Library Instruction: Theories & Methods*, ed. Maria Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 221–36; H. M. Jacobs and S. Berg, “Reconnecting Information Literacy Policy with the Core Values of Librarianship,” *Library Trends* 60, no. 2 (2011): 383–94.

and being aware that information is not neutral (economically, politically, or philosophically).

Likewise, students' conception of information ethics is incomplete without critical analysis. Part of using information ethically is thinking critically about how, why, and by whom scholarly knowledge is created. This includes asking questions like, whose questions get asked and whose questions get answered and why? How does an author's social position (such as their race, gender, class, sexuality, ability or citizenship status) influence funding decisions? How do funding agencies and their requirements influence the focus, scope and direction of research questions? What role do students play in the creation of scholarly knowledge? What role do non-academic community members play in the creation of scholarly knowledge? What is the cultural and intellectual value of knowledge created by students and other community members in contexts other than academia? In order to ask these larger questions, we need to expand information ethics beyond a "following the rules" formulation and into an ethics that values integrity. If our ethics does not consider how academic publishing excludes people of color, for instance, and erases or appropriates their contributions to communal knowledge production, then it is not truly ethical. It is, in fact, unethical, in a moral sense, to follow a code of ethics that doesn't reflect a self-awareness about the role of libraries and librarians in the subjugation of people of color through the devaluing of their contributions to what we consider academic knowledge, and in the case of indigenous populations of North America, the literal destruction of their ways of knowing through invasion and genocide, first, and then through a systematic refusal to recognize anything other than Eurocentric epistemologies as real or true.

Our reading of research justice in the context of information literacy illuminates a critical information ethics that is based on integrity, or doing the right thing, instead of merely following the rules set up to defend the rights and property of the powerful. Viewing information ethics through the research justice framework prompts us to critically examine what we and our students understand about the nature of academic knowledge production within the context of larger systems of knowledge and knowing. Research justice broadens the concept of intellectual authority to cover more than just academic expertise. And research justice provides us with ideas about how to connect "library research" to action by, for example, supporting students in creating, owning, and wielding information to affect change in their communities and lives. Furthermore, the example of research justice illustrates how we can further interrupt the neoliberal cooptation of information literacy by redirecting the focus of instruction away from an emphasis on information as a commodity to be bought and sold (or possibly stolen) and toward research as a process undertaken by individuals with agency. Ultimately, a close reading of research justice can help shift the position of our profession on how

information can be created, valued, and used in the academic context to “facilitate genuine, lasting social change.”<sup>42</sup>

## CONCLUSION

To truly develop a just and critical information ethics component of information literacy instruction, academic librarianship must be responsive to the knowledge generated about scholarly research by communities that have been historically ignored, marginalized, and/or harmed by Eurocentric research practices. Research justice is one such framework that both names the historical injustices perpetrated by the academy and incorporates restorative community practices into a rehabilitation and reclamation project. We argue for a critical information ethics within information literacy instruction that takes a holistic approach to the information ecosystem by questioning the entire academic knowledge production status quo; by centering decision making on integrity and equity rather than rules and regulations; by expanding “access” to include access to authority for marginalized ways of knowing; by respecting individuals’ and groups’ agency within the research process; and by resisting the commodification of information and the consumerification of information seekers.

### Critical information ethics:

- Holistic approach to information ecosystem that takes into account the time- and culture-specific sociopolitical context of knowledge creation;
- Questions the status quo regarding the primacy of peer review, the role of academia as sole arbiter of truth, etc.;
- Focuses on integrity and equity over rules and regulations;
- Re-examines concept of “access” and expands it to include access to authority for marginalized ways of knowing (community knowledge);
- Respects agency of individuals and communities within the research process;
- Resists commodification of information and consumerification of information seekers.

Being critical about information ethics in our information literacy instruction provides the means for librarians, students, and collaborating faculty to see what’s “behind the curtain” and to identify larger sociopolitical systems, biases, and agendas at

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<sup>42</sup> “DataCenter.”



work in the academic research process. Identifying these larger systems allows us to contextualize phenomena such as the belief in scientific neutrality, the assumption of objectivity in systems of academic quality control such as peer review, and the influence of money (such as grants from public and private funders) on every part of the research process. Furthermore, libraries and library workers can apply this critical information ethics approach beyond information literacy in order to leverage their power as gatekeepers to scholarly knowledge to support community knowledge creators not just in gaining entry into the closed academic structure, but in radically disrupting the dominance of Eurocentric academic knowledge as the only location of truth. Adopting a critical information ethics approach empowers libraries and library workers to develop ways of engaging with community knowledge and community knowledge creators on their own terms and with respect.

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